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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Eldred Gerhold, 92, Cedar Rapids
Karla Ice
286 13th St. NW, Cedar Rapids, IA 52405
1/26/2011**

Karla Ice: This is Karla Ice. And, I'm interviewing Eldred Gerhold, and he's in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The location of our interview is at his home. The date is January 26, and we're beginning at about 2:15. My name is Karla Ice, and this is

the first time that I have met Mr. Gerhold. The purpose of the interview is to be part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa Oral History Project. Do I have your permission to have this interview recorded?

Eldred Gerhold: Yes.

Ice: Very good. Okay, to begin with, what is your age?

Gerhold: Ninety-two.

Ice: And, I understand that you are one of the oldest alums of the school at Vinton.

Gerhold: Yes.

Ice: That's a claim to fame. How old were you when you became blind. What was the cause of your blindness?

Gerhold: I've been blind since birth, legally at least. It was caused by just under-developed optic nerves, and I did have some light perception for a few years. If a light was in a room, or something like, that or objects real close by, but that kind of faded out after a while also; I would say around my freshman year in high school, is when I first noticed it.

Ice: Okay. Where were you born? Are you from Iowa?

Gerhold: Yes; over by Palo, Iowa.

Ice: Okay, and were you from a large family or...

Gerhold: There were four of us kids.

Ice: I understand you went to school at Vinton?

Gerhold: Yes, I did.

Ice: How old were you when you first went there?

Gerhold: I was seven when I started.

Ice: And, how did your family find out about Vinton?

Gerhold: I think they got letters. I don't know whether our eye doctor turned in the information, my name and so forth, I don't know, but they did get some letters, I think, mentioning the school, advertising the school and things like that. That's where they got familiarized with it.

Ice: You were there for how long?

Gerhold: Thirteen years.

Ice: So, you started in 19...

Gerhold: 1925, and graduated in 1938.

Ice: Okay.

Gerhold: There were five years of high school in those days. There was no kindergarten when I started.

Ice: So, what were some of the classes that you took there?

Gerhold: Well, I had pretty much what, a lot of what you had at other schools. Of course, the first year was getting acquainted with reading Braille. We did that pretty much, and then we went from there to numbers, and then my third year we were exposed to Braille music; learning the notes in Braille and things of that sort. And, the first year was basically reading and spelling, and then the second year was a little bit more doing more with numbers and things, and some reciting poetry, English or language we called it, I think. From then on, of course, we had reading, a regular period of reading through seventh grade, but we also had geography, spelling up through seventh, I think. Arithmetic, algebra and geometry. We had such subjects as ancient history, medieval and modern history, and, of course, American history; we had several years of American history. And, my senior year would include economics, I think it was, and civics and government. We had civics and government, physiology and things like that.

Ice: Okay, that was a broad range of ...

Gerhold: Yeah, creative English I had the last year. We had a little bit of business English; English composition we had at different years.

Ice: Okay. And, what about specific skills related to blindness. You mentioned the Braille and the Braille music?

Gerhold: Yeah. Well, of course, in those days they had quite a bit of industrial shop work. They taught us to make

hammocks. I made a few of those, and did a little chair caning and did a little bit of rug weaving...I did some of that.

Ice: Okay, and then after Vinton did you have additional education?

Gerhold: No, other than private vocal training as a singer. I worked with a local teacher here from Cedar Rapids for a few years, and in later years there was a fellow who was pretty good. He was interested enough in doing...quite a few years, maybe 20 or more years later, we started under another teacher for a few years. He and I worked up and did some individual solos and stuff like that. So, that's the extent of vocal training, or the musical training that I got. I had piano in school, which I started the second semester of my fourth year at school. I took piano the rest of the way through school.

Ice: Okay, we'll wait for the clock. Okay. Are there any particular teachers or classes that stand out at Vinton?

Gerhold: Oh, let's see. Well, the teachers for the first couple of years I'd say were pretty good teachers. They were all right, Miss Ella Johnson and Miss Vera Everett. And, my latest years in high school, I would include Mr. Ryan, who was an excellent history teacher and a pretty good civics teacher. He was very good along those lines. He was also our high school boys' dorm supervisor when I was there.

Ice: When you lived in the dorm, did you go home on weekends or were you there all the time?

Gerhold: About once a month. I was close enough that I could do that. Of course, a lot of them though, they came from all over the state, and so they came in the fall and they didn't get home until Christmas, and then after Christmas they didn't get home until school closed about the end of May. But, I did get home every three or four weeks over the weekend.

Ice: How many were in your class there?

Gerhold: Let's see, when we graduated there were about seven. There were some here and there that dropped out from earlier years that were there for a while. One or two, at least one I know of whose eyes got better, and he was able to go back to regular public school again after about three years.

Ice: Okay. I understand there was a test of Braille, a test given when you were a senior? To see how fast you read Braille?

Gerhold: Yes, we had read speeding tests. We had a couple of those. We all got in on that. Some of us who didn't read Braille very much, they got in on that, too, and I did somewhere over 100 words a minute in reading.

Ice: That's an accomplishment.

Gerhold: Uh huh.

Ice: Did you ever go to the Iowa Department for the Blind in Des Moines for anything?

Gerhold: No. No, I never did any of that.

Ice: Okay, so after you finished your education at Vinton, what did you do next?

Gerhold: Well, besides the vocal training, I didn't have too much employment; like so many of us in those days, but I did quite a bit of singing. I used to get calls to sing for funerals and weddings and things of that nature. And, did a little radio work from 1943 through 1948. That was just a weekly devotional broadcast, which our minister from our church had on the radio, and that was a weekly radio program on a local station. That was four-and-a-half years about. And, then as time went on, I got into the rug weaving business. I kind of took a refresher down at the Jane Boyd Community House. They had looms down there and a lady that supervised it, so I brushed up on that weaving and then I got a loom and got the equipment from the Blind Commission, at that time. So, I started up in business again for myself in my own shop at home. And, after we moved to Cedar Rapids, then I really got into it pretty good. I was pretty steady at it every day.

Ice: And, did you sell rugs from your shop or at craft sales or...

Gerhold: Most of, the bulk of my work came from what people sewed up. They tore and sewed up and wound up in balls they brought in for themselves, and they would specify

what lengths they wanted and how they wanted their colors a little bit, and stuff like that.

Ice: So, it was like custom work?

Gerhold: Yes, it was more custom work, that's right. And, I did that for 34 years.

Ice: Okay.

Gerhold: And, another thing I did after we moved here to town...The funeral homes here in town, they put my name on as possible singer if people wanted a singer, so I did quite a bit of that. They called me in to sing for several things and do whatever the people requested as much as possible, and stuff like that. I did that for as long as people wanted. In more recent years people aren't using singers like they used to. But, I did do quite a bit of it.

Ice: So, did you have Braille music to all the different songs that people wanted?

Gerhold: Not all of it. No, I learned by ear. Sometimes I ran over it over the phone with an accompanist or something like that. We had rehearsals over the phone once in a while, a little bit. Yeah, and that's the way I did a lot of it. I didn't do much with Braille notes for quite a few years now. I've been doing a lot by ear.

Ice: Well, that's a gift.

Gerhold: And, our church choir is the same way. I figure it out at rehearsals pretty well.

Ice: Very good.

Gerhold: And, I was with the Cedar Rapids Concert Chorale for about 10 years. We did oratorios and things. This last December at our church I did three performances of one of the solos from Handel's Messiah; I did that.

Ice: Wonderful.

Gerhold: Yeah. And, I'm in choir over here at our church over on First Avenue. I do a little solo work here and there.

Ice: Yeah, I understand you do some entertaining at nursing homes.

Gerhold: Yes, I started that a couple of years ago. We were at the Windsor place visiting somebody one time, and then I got started over there, and that's in Vinton. And, now I've been going quite regularly there and the Lutheran Home in Vinton, and there is a Day Care Center for elderly they just go there during the day over on O Avenue, Milestones. So, I've been going over there every month for quite a while now.

Ice: Okay. How did you develop your interest in music? Was your family musical?

Gerhold: To a certain extent, yes. My mother was a pretty good singer. The youngest of my two sisters, she didn't take

many lessons, I don't know, couldn't afford it or something, but I think the teacher retired or something. She got so she could read music pretty good, so she could come home from town with a piece of popular sheet music and go to the piano and pretty well play it. She wasn't bad at sight reading. And so, they said I could carry a tune before I could talk.

Ice: Oh, wonderful.

Gerhold: So, I was starting...at the local Palo Community School I started singing for programs for them when I was maybe four or five years old.

Ice: Oh, wonderful.

Gerhold: Yeah.

Ice: And, you said you played the piano, you learned piano. Did you do any performing with piano or any other instruments?

Gerhold: No, no other instruments. I didn't go in for instrumental otherwise, just the piano and voice.

Ice: And, what part do you sing?

Gerhold: I'm second, well, I'm bass. And, I was second bass in our men's group that we had one time and in high school boys Glee Club, I was second bass.

Ice: So, what kind of music do you like the best?

Gerhold: Oh, I cover quite a bit of territory in that respect; as far as my own production is concerned.

15:00

Gerhold: When I go to these nursing homes and care centers I'm doing pretty much country and pop, and some Broadway show tunes, and some sacred things if they want it. I generally conclude with something sacred before I leave. Quite often I do a little off-setting of The Lord's Prayer or something like that, which the people like. And, sometimes we go to the Congregate Meal Site for senior citizens in Vinton, once in a while, and I perform. Sometimes they'll have music and a small band playing, and I'll sing with them occasionally, or maybe sing The Lord's Prayer or something before the meals, things of that nature. They've got a piano in there. I sometimes play there for a half hour before the meal if they don't have anything else scheduled that day.

Ice: Oh, okay. And, what are some of the Broadway show tunes that you like to sing?

Gerhold: Oh, there's: People Will Say we're In Love from the show Oklahoma; I Played On The Street Where You Live from My Fair Lady; Edelweiss and the Theme from The Sound of Music; and Some Enchanted Evening from South Pacific. Stuff like that.

Ice: Okay, a lot of the good old favorites.

Gerhold: Uh huh. And, I play It Might As Well Be Spring from the show State Fair. I've done that one.

Ice: Okay. Any other comments you have about your music or performances?

Gerhold: Well, to compare the way things were at school at that time, like I mentioned, I was in Boys Glee Club for a couple of years. My freshman year, the Boys glee club, we won the sub-district in Vinton; we went to the District in Charles City and we won that. We went to Iowa City to the State and got a superior there. We got superior all the way, and we were the only organization on the University of Iowa campus that day of all the events to come off with a superior rating.

Ice: Well, that's an accomplishment.

Gerhold: Yeah, It was.

Ice: Okay. What about your use of technology or reading. How do you like to read things?

Gerhold: Oh, I like reading. I like reading Braille. I'm not very far into technology. I don't know; I just don't seem to be getting stuff. We don't have a lot of space here in the first place, so...but I do enjoy reading.

Ice: What kind of books are you most interested in?

Gerhold: Oh, fiction books I've read some. I haven't done much lately. I kind of got away for a number of years, but I

may go back a little bit. But, I'll read some books like that. A little bit of biography and I take magazines like the Reader's Digest and our church puts out Braille publications which I read some. And, I have our own Braille hymnal.

Ice: Oh, great.

Gerhold: Yeah.

Ice: Let's see, I think Louise mentioned that you used to get Braille magazines from some place in Jacksonville, Illinois.

Gerhold: Oh, years ago before they had the Library going in Des Moines with the Department for the Blind, I used to get books. That's where I did most of my reading, at that time. I got a lot of books from Jacksonville. Their service as all right; I didn't have any trouble with it. I did all right. But, as I got more busy I kind of got away from it, with my weaving and all of the other stuff that's going on. So, I just kind of confined it to magazines and stuff more. I may go back to a little more of other things in reading in the days ahead, we'll see.

Ice: Sure. Okay. Do you think opportunities have changed a lot for blind people over the years?

Gerhold: Oh, I think they're much better; quite obvious now. I can remember the early days of the state convention in Vinton that we had in the late 1930's, I started going a little bit. There were a very small portion of the people that were gainfully employed or doing anything, it seemed, and some were not doing anything. Where now, I think there's much

more gainful employment, and I think another thing was different. Whatever is wrong with society today, there's one thing that is better I think. I think the people and their attitude toward those with disabilities is better, is a little better than it used to be.

Ice: And, can you give some examples of that?

Gerhold: Well, yeah. In early summer of 1939, we had a men's group from our church that went to celebrate an anniversary of another congregation over by Monticello affiliated with our denomination. So, we went over there and the thing that I noticed that day...people pointed, they said, "Is he blind," or something like that. We went to the basement at noon that day to eat and they said, "Oh, isn't that too bad he's blind," and all of that. Now, you can go some place and go among people and nobody says anything about it. It's just like a regular thing anymore, and I think that's a better part of it. It makes it better.

Ice: Yes, that's for sure.

Gerhold: Uh huh. Then, I was in Chicago for a National Youth Convention in Chicago in 1940. It was kind of like it was in 1939. People would look and say, "Oh, he's blind," and all of that you know. I think it's so much better that way today.

Ice: Okay. Are you involved in any community organizations of the blind, like ICUB?

Gerhold: Well, I'm in ICUB. Yes, uh huh. And, of course, I'm going to the support group every month.

Ice: Have you been involved in any of the recent issues like quiet cars, and things like that?

Gerhold: Well, I haven't been directly involved in it. No, but I can see the point where they would want some noise, a signal of some sort that cars are coming. I can understand that. But, I haven't been directly involved in it.

Ice: Sure, okay. Any other comments that you have about your experience as a blind person, either as a child or as an adult?

Gerhold: Well, I can't think of any off hand. I think the inclusion with things with other people and other kids; I think that it got a little better as I got a little older. I think in the earlier years they could kind of pass you by a little bit, which I think got a little better as time got on, went on. And, I think other than that it's pretty good.

Ice: Okay. What about your relationship with your family. What did your brothers and sisters think when you went away to school and only came home on weekends?

Gerhold: Oh, they just didn't say too much about it I guess. They just kind of accepted it. Yeah.

Ice: And, how did you feel about having to go away to school?

Gerhold: Well, it took a little while to get used to it. It takes you away from your community and the activities around your home and things. You're not quite a part of it. That's probably, I would say the main thing, but you kind of got over that as you got older and went longer.

Ice: And, I think they had a lot of activities at the school to, to keep you busy?

Gerhold: Yeah, they did pretty well.

Ice: Do you remember any...did you students ever play any pranks or anything at Vinton, play tricks on the teachers or anything?

Gerhold: Oh, a little bit. Not so much in the classroom as in the dormitories. In the high school dorms, for instance, they would pull things around the sleeping rooms, like put chairs on top of the beds once in a while or maybe turn one sheet inside the other one different ways, they used to call it "Dutch fashion" when you were getting in the bed and stuff like that. Little tricks like that. And, just things like that. We had a relief supervisor and they'd try to keep you busy when he was on duty and things like that. I like the guy pretty well. I kind of hated that...I didn't go in for a lot of that stuff against him that way. I got along with him pretty good.

Ice: Well, that's good. What about learning to maintain your home; how to fix things and maintain a home? Has that been a problem as a blind person?

Gerhold: Well, yeah, it probably would be. Of course, I've always had people around. I probably didn't do it as extensively as some. We had three or four of us home. And, after my brother and my youngest sister were married, but I had another sister who didn't marry and she was home much of the time. And, I have help with things a little bit here and there, like with storm windows, and of course, when she was laid up and things, we would mark things in the way of foods and then put it in the freezer, and then I could get it out and heat it on the stove, and stuff like that. I did a bit of that. And then, when we lived on the farm, I did little things in the way of chores.

We had our stove in the kitchen was for burning wood and cobs and things. When we shelled corn in the fall, there would be a pile of cobs outside, or my dad would haul some into the basement, and we'd have a couple of rooms in the basement with cobs in the wintertime. We had a basket at the end of the stove in the kitchen, and I kept that full by taking it down to the basement and filling it up with the cobs every so often when it needed it. That kind of kept them going that way. And, we had a windmill. We pumped the water by...well if it was in gear, the wind would take care of it, but otherwise you used a handle on it and pumped it. I would sometimes get a pail of water from our place and I'd pump that water, and then bring it into the house and see that we had fresh water. And, in the later years when we had a few chickens, we had...my mother and I had a routine every afternoon, about 4:30 we'd go up and she'd fill the water pail, and I would go on down to the house with the pail of water, and she would go and gather the eggs. That was kind of our schedule every afternoon about 4:30.

Ice: Did you help take care of any of the animals on the farm?

Gerhold: Not quite so much, a little, but not quite so much. I had a dog. We had a dog that was a pretty good companion that way, and I kind of looked after him a little bit.

Ice: Any other comments you would have about blindness or parts of your life that we haven't talked about yet?

Gerhold: I can't think of anything right now.

Ice: Anything else about technology. Do you use a slate and stylus?

Gerhold: Yeah, I use a slate and stylus.

Ice: Did you ever use the Braille writer?

Gerhold: I did in school. I just never got one afterwards; of course, the one thing. My early years of church choir, I would take my equipment down here, even when we lived out on the farm and bring it out here and go to his place where we had our practices, and he'd read the notes and words and I would write it; see a slate and stylus is handier to take around, you see. So, I got pretty much into that rather than a Braille writer on a regular basis, that is.

Ice: Yeah, sure that would be a lot more portable. So, what do you do to keep busy now that you're retired from the rug

business? You've already talked about all the music you do in church and everything; any other hobbies?

Gerhold: Well, that's pretty much, besides reading. I follow sports a little bit. I like the Hawkeyes basketball, and football not quite so much; and then the baseball in the summertime. The Cedar Rapids Colonels, the Cubs and some of the major league games a little bit. And, of course, the things that I read that come in.

Ice: Sure.

Gerhold: And, I practice and do things on the piano a little bit, and I like some of the TV shows. I like some of radio. Between some of the stations here in town, KMRY and the University of Iowa station's FM, I keep them tuned quite a bit. I like documentary features a little bit...All Things Considered, which is on around 4:00 in the afternoon, and of course the news at 5:00 and 6:00 on Channel 9. I follow the events.

30:00

Ice: When you were in the rug weaving business, was there any particularly unusual or difficult request that people asked you to make?

Gerhold: Only one occasion, one lady thought she wanted a little narrower, not quite as wide, standard was 27, and it was pretty hard to change your setting to all of it. I just had the one machine, and I didn't. She brought the rags over and I think she tried to get me to do it, and probably nobody else

would do it either, I don't know. But anyhow, I did finally come through with it, but it was quite a job. Other than that, people were pretty good.

Ice: You didn't have any extra, extra long ones or anything?

Gerhold: No. I did a stairway carpet for a lady. I did our own stairway carpet when we lived on Williams Blvd, and we did a living room carpet once.

Ice: Oh, that was quite a job.

Gerhold: Yeah, that was several strips, and sewed them together. It took a lot of rags, took a lot of material. We used wool.

Ice: That would have been a good rug.

Gerhold: Yeah, it was pretty good.

Ice: Where did you get the wool for some project like that?

Gerhold: Well, it was just stuff that we saved over the years, pretty much. They seemed to have enough of it to do it.

Ice: Well, I don't think of anymore questions. Thank you so much for your time.

Gerhold: Yeah, I hope you'll find it of some value to the people.

Ice: Oh, I'm sure that it will be.

31:55
(End of Recording)

Jo Ann Slayton
04/26/2011